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ABSTRACT

As part of a research project on "Patterns of Successful Assistance in Urban School Improvement Programs," this paper presents a case study of an assister's work in the Constituency-Based School Renewal Program (CSR), implemented in an elementary school in Brooklyn, New York. CSR is a program aiming to institute a process by which a school will improve itself. The program lends resources and personnel support until the school is able to independently continue the improvement process. The school under study is located in a poor working-class neighborhood, with a student body that is 95% black and 5% Hispanic. It had lost ground in climate and achievement under a former principal, and the renewal program was then instituted. The paper describes the chronology of the assister's techniques for mobilizing the implementation of the CSR program in the school. His activities included forming a planning team and training them to work effectively with the whole school; helping the planning team to write a comprehensive improvement plan; and helping them to implement the plan. He remained available to act as a trouble shooter as problems arose. The results of this implementation of the CSR program included an improved school climate as a result of closer relationships between teachers, parents and support staff; the use of new products for curricular improvement; and an increase in student achievement. (CG)

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CASE STUDIES OF SUCCESSFUL ASSISTANCE IN URBAN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMS

II. CONSTITUENCY-BASED SCHOOL RENEWAL PROGRAM[1]

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INTRODUCTION

"Patterns of Successful Assistance in Urban School Improvement Programs" is a research project conducted by the Center for Policy Research and Teachers College in New York City during 1983-85. Over one hundred interviews were conducted to study three school improvement programs from the perspectives of specific schools (principals, teachers and parents), assisters and their managers. Because of the complex nature of schools, we selected the case study format as the most effective method for conveying a chronology of a successful assister's experiences in a specific school. The chronology shows the dynamics of the assister's work over time; it is not a complete history, but an integrated picture of critical incidents.

This case study of the Constituency-Based School Renewal Program was based on 12 interviews with teachers, the principal, and a parent. The assister was observed during a planning meeting and informal interaction, and was interviewed twice; the program manager was interviewed three times. The raw data from these interviews and observations were coded, rewritten as summaries by topics, and analyzed for common patterns. The case has been reviewed for accuracy by the program manager and assister.

[1]Read at the American Educational Research Association meetings, Chicago, April 1985.

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I. BEFORE THE BEGINNING: THE STATE OF THE SCHOOL

A. Background Information. The setting for this case study is PS 482,[2] an elementary school in Brooklyn where the school improvement process has been in place over a period of three years. The school is located in a poor/working class neighborhood where the education of children has been a prime issue bringing the community together.

95% of the 564 pupils now attending the school are black, and 5% are Hispanic. The school puts emphasis on ethnic history and culture of these groups in its program. The staff of the school is presently 55% black and 35% white. The staff and the students seem to be on very friendly terms; warm greetings are typical as they pass through the halls.

PS 482 is described by parents and staff members as being a "fantastic" school, which is well organized and well run. The staff works cohesively in school, and socializes together outside of the work place. This is the case now and it was the case 5-10 years ago. But between then and now, the school had slipped into a lull in which not much progress was being made. The improvement program discussed here, Constituency-based School Renewal (CSR), was brought in to rejuvenate the school, and restore the level of achievement and progress which it had experienced earlier.

B. Problems and Needs. During the former period of progress (the early 1970s) the principal at PS 482 was Michael Rosen, the man who is now the superintendent of the district. He had generated a good tone in the school. When he left, another principal was appointed and he remained at the school for 2 years. During this period, the positive tone and much of the impetus for forward movement ceased. Those who were teaching at the school during this period of time feel that they lost ground in climate and in achievement. Then

[2] All names are pseudonyms.

another principal, Sylvia Lear, was chosen; and it was she, along with the superintendent, who had the idea of recapturing the previous momentum toward progress and excellence.

C. Getting Involved with the School Improvement Program. At about the same time, the CSR program was being introduced to the district support unit. Staff members from the project were asked to conduct introductory presentations for school principals in the district. After this experience, Rosen asked these principals to write statements of need concerning their schools, and to present them to the district. These statements proposed some ideas for improvement projects in the schools which could be instituted under the CSR program. From these proposals, district staff members selected the schools which would participate. PS 482 became one of the original schools in the district to take part in this particular school improvement project.

The assister present now, Tim Robertson, was assigned to PS 482 at the beginning of the change process. He describes the school at the time of entry as involved in quite a few programs which did not articulate with one another. The energy of the staff was scattered. The school was receptive to programs, but the number of different programs in place had caused the school to become a group of separate factions. He saw that integration and linking were needed to get the staff working as a whole again.

II. THE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM, CSR

A. Assumptions and General Approach. The CSR program, which was chosen to aid in the improvement of PS 482, aims to institute a process by which the school will function to improve itself. It lends support in terms of resources and personnel until the school is able to become independent in this ongoing process of improvement. CSR assisters train a team of people, insiders who are involved with the school in some capacity, to lead the process. Short and long

range goals for improvements are set, developed and implemented by this team, mostly by means of a written comprehensive plan.

These are the visible results of the program. But on another level the program attempts to empower people, to broaden their knowledge and awareness of the people and th processes around them, and to expand their control over their own lives.

To this end, the program stresses the importance of broad representation on the planning team. Its members must represent all sorts of school interest groups: teachers, administrators, support staff and parents. An interesting outcome of such broad representation is that it leads toward success by eliminating dissension, and by maximizing the chance for consensus throughout the entire improvement process.

The assisters who work for the CSR facilitate this improvement process on two levels. One assister works directly with the school and the other is a member of the district staff who coordinates the improvement efforts throughout the district. Basically, the school assister orients the school to the project, helps in the formation of the team and the writing of the comprehensive plan, and links together personnel and resources on many levels in such a way that school improvement begins to be realized. Any given assister usually works with 6-7 different schools.

The program has developed specific nomenclature to designate schools and their time of involvement with the CSR program. "Target schools" are those which have participated in the program for 2 years or less; "model schools" are schools which are in their third year of work with the program and in which the direct assistance of an assister is being decreased. The schools discussed here, PS 482, is now a "model school".

B. <u>The Change Agent</u>. The assister who is involved with PS 482, Tim

Robertson, has worked for the CSR program since it began 4 years ago. Even before CSR actually started, he was acquainted with the plans for the program and he worked with the program managers during 1979 in an unofficial capacity.

Before that, Tim had been involved with many programs, institutions and agencies in education, business and industry. For example, he was the head of institutional research for the City University of New York. His work experience includes many other teaching and consulting positions. He holds degrees in science, education and psychology with certifications in clinical psychology, school psychology and supervision and administration.

This sort of background is probably relevant to success as an assister in school improvement because it provides the assister with a wealth of strategies, tactics and experiences from many fields. It also allows this assister to work in other capacities in the program, such as filling in for the program managers and helping to plan for the program's future activities in the schools. Outside the program, he is involved with agencies which link together community and business resources.

Presently, Tim is working as an CSR consultant in seven schools. His typical approach to being a school assister is to observe and participate with school personnel both on the job and in informal social situations. That approach gives him a better insight into the context of his work. Tim describes his general learning style as reflective and negotiating. He tends to "mull things over and experiment with solutions". School personnel describe his style as flexible; they feel he approaches people and situations according to the style needed at the time. They cite organization skills, human relations skills and knowledge of school and curriculum as being his areas of strength.

III. HOW SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PROCEEDED

A. Entry. After the district chose the school to be a participant in the program, the entry took only a few weeks. Tim spent much of this time meeting with Sylvia Lear, the principal for discussion and orientation. Mrs. Lear was supportive and eager. She read and discussed the literature which Tim left for her. They met at least once per week during this stage.

At the same time, Tim was making himself known to other school staff members and parents. He was especially careful to include paras and custodians in his one to one contacts and group discussions. He explained and answered questions, attended faculty meetings and made everyone aware of the procedures and goals of the project.

After a few weeks of this networking and giving information, people began to volunteer for the planning team.

B. Mobilization. In order to extend the membership of the planning team, Tim actively sought the names of people who already had leadership positions in the school, or who had shown the potential for leadership. He talked with these people more about the role of the team. There were also people the principal wanted on the team. They were encouraged to join. Tim helped to guide this process of selection without actually selecting the members.

After about 3 weeks, the team had about 18-20 members, but the criteria for broad representation by all school groups had not been met. Thus, another orientation meeting was held for all school staff and for parents, to remind them that balanced representation had to be achieved. The district-based assister, Tim's partner, also helped in this effort by attending these meetings and encouraging team membership. More people joined after these actions.

Choosing a chairperson was critical to the way the newly formed team would function. In this case, Tim made the suggestion that diplomacy called

for several co-chairpersons, who would represent the various groups. Three were chosen - one a teacher, one a para and the third a parent. Again, the assister had laid the foundation for consensus and success throughout the schools by making sure the planning team had broadly-based leadership.

Gathering a team and choosing team leaders went swiftly in this school because of sustained enthusiasm among the teachers and the administrator. The team was open to ideas and committed to school change.

The next step in this process was to train the team to function with a maximum of efficiency and success. But Tim had to guard against some potential problems. For example, the team could become the elite group in the school; the assister could become the object of manipulative efforts by the principal and/or district people to carry out their own agendas; or the school could become dependent upon the assister. Tim noted: "You have to figure out where the dependency is coming from and what is fostering it." Special handling of the situation was now in order sto encourage participant ownership. Tim continued to meet with school personnel who were not on the team. He supported them with ideas on classroom management. When doubts arose among them as to how the team was spending its time, written records of the team meetings were circulated and discussed with non-team members. The assessment of school needs was being carried out at this time and care was taken to include everyone's input.

Tim and the team did a needs assessment to get a profile of the school, especially in the areas of student behavior, curriculum (science and social studies), tone, climate and fund-raising. The assessment was to form the basis for planning activities. Sub-committees were formed for each of these areas. All along, the team was being taught key skills: how to set an agenda, how to reach consensus, how to plan and to stay on task. Tim describes his role at

this time as "riding herd" over the team, reminding them of their mission and keeping them on track. He did this with workshops, games and role playing. Team members describe his style during this time as "knowing when to have fun and knowing when to be serious."

The principal remained supportive, but she often acted in a more directive manner than was necessary. She was anxious to have everything exactly right, and tried to rush the process.

One thing Tim learned during this period was why school people often have tunnel vision. He could see that they were not in a position to be as flexible as he was. They were confined to the classroom and to the school building while working on improving the school; he had the flexibility to work outside with a broader set of people and resources. Accordingly, Tim moved to use his flexibility to help the work of the team. He supported takingtime to learn the process, when the principal was rushing them. He had them meet with teams from other schools to compare notes. He also helped Mrs. Lear realize she was setting a fast pace, without saying so directly.

At this time, Tim and his district partner were conducting bi-weekly workshops for the team. The central CSR program office also ran training and information workshops for groups of teams from various schools and districts. The two assisters debriefed each other after meetings and workshop sessions to evaluate, plan, consult with and support each other.

The building and training of the team took approximately one year, although it continues on, even now, into the final stages of school improvement work.

C. Planning. During the stage in which the team was writing the comprehensive plan, there was a change in administration in the school. In the fall of 1982, Sylvia Lear left, and the teacher who was the co-chairperson of

the team, Arthur Wayman, became the new principal. This change decreased the action of the team. It met less frequently until the school could regroup under the new administrator. Because of this lapse in activity, the actual plan-writing process took two years.

The change in administration seemed, however, to be a good one for the improvement project. Tim and the new principal took stock of the process as it had proceeded to that point. The planning began again at a more comfortable pace. In order for the needs assessment data not to overwhelm the team, it was agreed that two areas should be chosen as priorities. The team initially chose student behavior and curriculum (science and social studies). A time line was established for addressing the problems in these areas.

The process began to pick up speed again as Tim and the principal worked to help the team in finalizing the written plan. The process began to "fly" as the new principal "engendered enthusiasm and was vocal about what he wanted to do..." Tim spent a lot of time with him. Both of them acted as facilitators — Tim kept the team on task and showed them how to apply the concepts they had learned; the principal lent administrative support and invited all teachers who were coming in new to the school to join the planning team. This inclusion of new personnel helped to orient them to the school and helped to rally the entire staff around the process of school improvement.

Much of the critical writing was accomplished at one weekend retreat. For this event, Tim arranged for a setting which was conducive to both work and relaxation. Before they went, he planned a solid agenda with the team and the principal, and put it in writing. The team set up goals for the weekend. Tim put together a packet of materials for the chairpersons and went over it with them beforehand.

At the retreat, Tim reminded the team of their goals and helped them to

follow the agenda. After each session, Tim met with the principal and the chairpersons to discuss outcomes. There was time left in the schedule for everyone to relax and take part in recreation during the weekend. On Sunday morning, during the wrap-up session, the principal gave out certificates as a gesture of support to the participants. Written reports of what had been accomplished were distributed among all the school staff. A celebration was planned when the written plan was finalized. This comprehensive plan included recommendations for addressing the school's needs in the areas of student behavior, science and social studies curriculum, writing skills and fundraising.

D. Implementation. Tim's next action was to inquire of the team, "Now what are you going to do? What is the next step?" The team decided to develop a student handbook to implement the student behavior code which was written in the plan. They also proceeded to write new curriculum manuals and tests in science and social studies, and to have a science fair. Some of these things had already been started before the plan was finalized. Financial problems arose during this stage, since the school needed money to put the plan into practice. Funds which the program had given to the school previously had been used for the retreats and for parent honorariums. Most of the projects which were related to the plan's implementation required the purchase of materials.

Thus, skills of resource development and management were needed. Tim, the principal and the team worked to overcome these deficiencies in funds and other resources. Linkages which Tim and the principal had established in the district and in the school system at large became useful. For example, a writing laboratory was being established, and the teacher who was going to become a cluster teacher in it needed aid in setting up the center. Wayman and Tim knew of equipment in the system which was not being used. They managed to

acquire a stencil cutter and Gestetner printer without any expenditure of funds. Tim also arranged to bring in resource persons from the CSR program and from the district to help set up the writing lab. The goal was to encourage writing and to print and publish a school newspaper. The newspaper was produced in the spring of 1983 and the plans are in the works for a second edition this year.

Evidence of the implementation of the school beautification program and the student behavior code is visible all over the school. As one enters the main door, a colorful sign says, "Welcome to our quiet school". Near drinking fountains, signs remind children not to spill or splash water on the floor.

Thus, during this stage, the assister helped to translate the plan into actions and resources. But he also did quite a bit of monitoring and evaluating of the improvement process. He helped develop an evaluation form, through which the school staff could comment on the progress of the work and assess its impact.

E. Institutionalization. From September 1983 up to spring 1984, the process of institutionalization has been taking place. During this phase, Tim has begun to reduce his direct involvement with the school, though he remains available. His role is one of monitoring the process which the school is trying to continue by itself, and acting as a troubleshooter when difficult problems arise. He provides support and momentum for the structure and process which have been set up over the past three years. He notes that sometimes this simply means making the right phone call on the school's behalf at the right time to the right person. For example, when the staff was performing a play for the pupils, they wanted it videotaped but found that the equipment at the Board of Education would not be available. Tim arranged to have taping equipment from the CSR program's central office there when it was needed.

The role of the principal is also different during institutionalization. Mr. Wayman states that he is still a member of the team, but he now gives less direct input. He works at developing and fostering the linkages which were created during earlier stages. He calls in Tim to help them over the rough spots only when they can't solve a problem or when th[illegible] need [illegible] specific resource. Generally, it is felt that the school has adopted the philosophy of the program; the concepts are well incorporated into policies and practices. Tim's assistance is only occasionally needed to keep the work going. The principal and the team are taking the role of the assister themselves.

Two recent incidents illustrate the CSR work at PS 482. First, the planning team developed and produced a play on Black History for the students. The actors were the school staff (including the principal and Tim). This event served an academic purpose, but it also unified the staff, made them closer to students, and fostered good relations within the planning team. Second, there are plans in the school to publish a journal documenting the progress made through the CSR program. Its goal is to give insight to other schools and districts about how the program can make a difference.

The chronology discussed above is summarized in Chart 1 on the following page.

Chart 1

SUMMARY CHRONOLOGY OF ASSISTER'S WORK

TARGET OF ASSISTER'S WORK	STAGES OF WORK				
	ENTRY	MOBILIZATION	PLANNING	IMPLEMENTATION	INSTITUTIONALIZATION
PLANNING TEAM		-organized the team -suggested broad participation of 3 co-chairpersons -helped form sub- -trained team using modelling, role playing & consensus games	-gave the team dir. -poked and prodded subcommittees -fostered team ownership of process -linked team with others like them for exchange	-praised the team's completion of the final plan -questioned on how to proceed from writing to action	-weaned the school from direct input by him
PRINCIPAL	-orientation mtgs to explain program & clarify role of the assister -familiarized principal with school improvement literature	-balanced the principal's over-zealousness by supporting the team's progress -used analysis skills & conflict management to act as buffer between team and principal	-restarted planning with new principal -supported the new administrator's enthusiasm		-scheduled periodic mtgs for troubleshooting
TEACHERS	-introduced himself -clarified his role	-attended faculty mtgs to discuss the project -supported nonteam members with suggestions for classroom management	-kept non-team members appraised of team's progress	-met with & supported teacher assigned to the new writing lab -got equipment needed for implementation from elsewhere in the system -arranged for other consultants to speak to Ts to show how the writing lab cd work	
OTHER SCHOOL PERSONNEL	-introduced himself to all factions & answered their questions about the project	-met with paras, custodians, etc., on a 1:1 basis to make them feel welcome in the process			
WHOLE SCHOOL		-did needs assessment to ferret out the issues most imp.for the school	-became familiar with some agencies in the neighborhood which were involved in developing change agents for community action	-helped to translate plan into action -helped to develop & link together the resources needed for implementation (used network of personal friends)	-developed evaluation f to assess progress -working on stronger li betw.school & district -helped with logistics & equipment for staff's dramatic production

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Outcomes Achieved. All of the outcomes projected by the CSR program have been achieved to some extent in PS 482. The ones which are most visible, and most frequently cited by parents, paras and teachers are short run successes, such as the behavior code, the school beautification effort, and the change in school climate stemming from the way the teachers, parents and support staff have been brought together. Tim states that PS 482, "has pretty much incorporated our philosophy and has put it into practice...they have institutionalized the planning team process so well."

The principal adds to this list the use of new products, which includes specific curriculum improvements, and change in student achievement: there has been an increase in reading scores for the past three years. The project has helped the principal in his efforts to balance academic subjects and cultural activities. The school has a dance troupe and one of the few elementary school marching bands in the city. Wayman also mentions school satisfaction with the program and the positive relationship with the assister, as a result of Tim Robertson's particular skills in school improvement.

Capacity-building as an outcome is being realized as the institutionalization stage progresses and the team proves that it does indeed have the capacity to bring about and to foster all of the outcomes mentioned above. One team member acknowledges that his capacity for improving schools has grown immensely, but regrets, ironically enough, that none of the school staff has been given academic credit for this added knowledge and change.

One definite example of the capacity building outcome is that the principal and the team have independently applied for and received a grant from the JWB Corporation. It will provide the funds for 25 computers and computer training for the staff.

Of course, those who saw the school through all of the phases may be best

at judging the outcomes. Tim, the assister, acknowledges all those above, and by his choice of this school for a case study he labels it as one which has been highly successful in the program. Another irony is that his own contribution to this process is somewhat diminished when one speaks to school personnel, who are hard pressed to give exact details of what Tim did. This "invisibility" is probably a function of the success of the capacity-building approach; the school staff become convinced that they can function as their own agent of change.

Arthur Wayman, the principal, made a succinct statement on where the school is now as compared to where it was. He said, "We used to strive to be the best in the district. The program has us striving to compete with all the schools in the city."

Conclusions. This case study has been written about a school with very successful experience in the CSR school improvement program. The reasons for this success lie both in the program and in the school itself. There is no question that the school had the right personnel to carry out this process from the start; that is acknowledged by the assister and the school staff. There is reason, though, to cite the particular personalities and working styles of the assister and the present principal, which are quite amicable and congruent on many levels. In many cases after the changes of administration the process ran like a "well-oiled machine" because of the special relationship and compatibility of these two main actors. That has implications for the placement of specific assisters in particular schools with particular people - a task which is handled at the level of the central program office.

What factors inherent in the CSR program most aided success? There is a general theme: the effort to maximize the chances for any given incident to succeed. That seems to be part of the CSR philosophy. Every effort is made to

cover every base and to close all possible loopholes which could lead to problems. We can see a range of activities aimed this way:

linking the school with district and system levels to assure support from above;

choosing team members with broad-based representation and who already possess some leadership skills;

setting agenda very tightly and checking/rechecking it with the membership;

following up immediately on progress and rewarding it;

monitoring dilemmas and troubleshooting until they are resolved.

In sum, the assister used the best techniques of interpersonal relations, management and planning to assure success in the process of goal-setting, planning and implementation--and developed the capacity of the school staff to continue the process on their own.